The First U.S. Airmail Stamp, Scott C3

Although numbered as Scott C3, the 24¢ Curtiss Jenny issue (Figure 1) is the first U.S. airmail stamp. The Act of May 6, 1918 authorized the Post Office Department to carry the mail by airplane and set a rate of 24 cents per ounce. On May 11, 1918, the same day that President Woodrow Wilson signed the Act, the Post Office announced the new service, as follows:

Figure 1

Washington, D.C., May 11th, 1918

Aeroplane Mail Service

Aeroplane Mail Service will be established May 15th 1918, between Washington, Philadelphia and New York, one round trip daily except Sundays. Letters and sealed parcels…may be mailed at Washington, Philadelphia and New York for any city in the United States, or its possessions or postal agencies.

The rate of postage will be 24 cents per ounce or fraction thereof, which includes special delivery service. Postage may be paid by affixing either the distinct aeroplane stamps or its equivalent in other postage stamps. When the latter are used, the mail should be endorsed, "By Aeroplane." Mail by aeroplane may be registered by prepayment of 10 cent registry fee in addition to postage.

Until further notice the aeroplanes will leave Belmont Park, N.Y., and Washington, D.C. at 11:30 A.M.…

Otto Praeger,
2nd Asst. Postmaster General

This necessitated a 24¢ airmail stamp, which was issued on May 13, 1918. In keeping with the importance of the occasion, a bicolored stamp was created by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. (This, of course, led to the airmail invert, which is covered in a separate set of Manual pages.)

It was only when the airmail rate was reduced to 16¢ (including a 10¢ Special Delivery fee) effective July 15, 1918, that a 16¢ airmail stamp (Scott C2) was needed, and then to 6¢ (dropping the Special Delivery fee unless specifically requested and paid for by the sender) effective December 15, 1918, that a 6¢ stamp (Scott C1) was needed. But because Scott treats these three stamps as one set, and numbers them from lowest to highest denomination, the earliest issued stamp is numbered as C3.

As scheduled, the first flight from New York to Washington, D.C. took place on May 15. Shown in Figure 2 is a cover carried on that

Figure 2

flight, signed by B. B. Lipsner, who was in charge of the Post Office's airmail service. The cover is addressed to Percy McG. Mann, who is credited with creating the labels that are affixed in the upper right and lower left corners.

Note the use of Washington-Franklin heads and the notation above Lipsner's signature, "No Airmail Stamps." If you look carefully at the label in Figure 3, with the C3 stamp, you can see that space was provided for three definitive sized stamps, and given the late announcement of the availability of a 24¢ airmail stamp, it is possible that the label was designed with the Washington-Franklins usage in mind.

Mekeel's Weekly Stamp News of May 25, 1918 carried the report "Written on the Field" by A. C. Roessler:

Promptly on schedule…the initial airplane U.S. mail service started from Belmont Park. Aviator Torrey Webb tuned up the machine (an Italian motor in a Curtiss type plane) and at 11:28 a special car on the Long Island R.R. raced to the edge of the field, where a waiting U.S. Mail auto carried the two bags of aero mail to the impatient messenger of the air. There were about 10,000 pieces in the bags for Philadelphia and Washington. Postmaster Patten had a wire from Washington, informing him that 4,000 letters were being sent northward…

At 3:30, five battle planes from Mineola training field, arose in triangle formation to greet the postplane from Philadelphia, which was then a speck on the horizon…and five minutes later…the first regular daily airplane mail pouch was lifted from the observer's seat and rushed to the waiting auto…

Newspaper correspondents mentioned the enthusiasm philatelists took in this airline mail…While much interest was shown in the event by P.O. officials and members of the Aero Club of America, it can be said with safety that the stamp collectors were the most interested.

Shown in Figure 3 is a cover with the 24¢ airmail issue tied to the cover by a Washington departure May 15, 1918 cancel with the "First Trip" inscription. However, this trip from Washington to New York was not successful, as is re-

Figure 3

ported in *Mekeel's* of May 25, 1918:

"The Air Mail service on the first day, May 15, was carried out as follows: at 11:30 a.m. Lieut. Torrey Webb left Belmont Park, L.I., N.Y. He arrived at Bustleton, Philadelphia, Pa., at 1 p.m…At 1.06 p.m., Lieut. James C. Edgerton left Bustleton, and he arrived at the Polo Grounds, Washington, D.C., at 2:50 p.m.…

At 11.47 a.m., Lieut. George Leroy Boyle left the Polo Grounds, Washington, D.C., and descended at Waldorf, Maryland, at 12.05 p.m., after engine trouble, breaking the propeller of his aeroplane when landing…The aeroplane in which Lieut. Boyle left Washington was numbered 38262, and this is the one that is pictured on the

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